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### INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION: AN EMERGING INTEREST IN THE ROLE OF CULTURE

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In the last two decades the interest of international communication scholars has shifted to the study of international communication and culture. Schiller, Nordenstreng and Hamelink, among others, have explored the impact of external communication influences (such as television programming, information flow, multi-national corporations, etc.) on a nation's culture. Perhaps the culmination of this concern came in the MacBride Commission Report. This paper examines the reasons for this emerging interest in communication and culture. It traces the factors that lead to international concerns over the fact that international economic and communication powers were dominated by the Western nations, leading to the formation of the MacBride Commission to study the problems of international communication. This paper treats the subjects of international communication and the dissemination of cultural forms as two inseparable elements. As Prosser (1974: 417) puts it:

Communication and culture are so closely bound together that virtually all communication engaged in by humans is culturally linked. Even when we engage in intrapersonal communication, that communication which takes place unconsciously or consciously within each of us, our own cultural background affects all of our actions and reactions.

Also this paper does not intend to distinguish between international and intercultural communication as two separate entities as discreetly discussed by scholars of international communication and intercultural communication [See Maletzke (1976) for details of similarities and differences of international and intercultural communication]. Rather, it takes

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a general view that every human communication involves culture. Therefore, it is assumed that every international communication, that is, communication across national boundaries, involves cultures of the people of the particular nations.

### **Communication Technology**

Modern communication technologies have speeded up the national and international flow of information. If we look back at what Marshall McLuhan said when he introduced the concept of Global Village, we are now actually living in the village of an electronic age. News travel from one part of the world to another faster than it was in a traditional village. What the public read in New York newspapers, could also be read in Kuala Lumpur, Calcutta, Hong Kong, etc., at least in part. What the Americans watch on United States television network news, could also be watched in France, Jakarta, Cairo, Dar es Salaam, etc. Michael Jackson, Madonna, Bon Jovi are not only popular culture idols of the West, but also of the East and the South. Also, leaders from each corner of the world can be pulled into a forum by Ted Koppel's Nightline on the ABC without having to be present in the ABC studio in Washington.

How does the communication revolution affect the international community? The implication of global communication on world community can be interpreted in many ways. Many people, especially in the Third World nations, think that the invasion of Western communication fares, such as television programmes, into the developing nations as a cultural incursion. Communication is intimately linked to culture for what people communicate with each other is the transfer of cultural elements within a society or between societies.

The transfer of cultural elements from one society to another is tremendously enhanced with the improvement on modern communication technology. It seems that the world is leading towards a cultural harmonisation. One may argue that this trend probably benefits international community at large as with it, cultural gaps between nations could be narrowed and better understanding could emerge when nations share many cultural elements. In reality, however, many nations despise this trend as they want to preserve their own cultural integrity and identity. The tension between the West and the Third World is exacerbated by the fact that modernisation and national development programs undertaken by the developing nations depend on an enormous importation of technologies and expertise from the West. These technologies and expertise have a tendency to be Western biased for technology itself is a product of culture.

### **New Technology**

Most important in the recent development of new communication technology, which was discussed in the MacBride Commission reports, are satellites and video cassette tape recorders. With the introduction of these technologies, it becomes more difficult for the authorities of the new nations to monitor the flow of communication—bringing along the foreign cultural elements—into their respective countries. Direct Satellite Transmission of television channels throughout the world is the thing of the future. Communication satellites are widely used today by advanced countries to monitor meteorological patterns and even military surveillance in certain cases. Satellite pictures were shown to have been used for military tactical purposes by advanced nations (the US and Britain) during the 1982

Falkland War between Great Britain and Argentina. These photos were supplied by the US satellites. Another example is the satellite pictures were used by the US to monitor the manufacturing of weapons by Chemical Plants in Libya recently. These activities are definitely feared by the Third World countries as dangerous signs of military intrusion and domination by advanced nations over Third World countries in the future.

The availability of video cassette machines at affordable prices in the market poses another problem to the leaders of the new nations. Videos can provide an alternative to traditional media channels which are controlled by the governments of most Third World countries. Thus, it tends to draw away audience's attention from tuning in to the government development programmes. With the availability of the videos in their homes, audience, especially from the middle class, are now tuning in less to the national television than ever before. They, therefore, receive less government development messages. What really concerns the governments are the use of the video machines to view shows that have been banned by the authorities such as the triple X-rated shows from the advanced countries (for information on smuggling of videotapes into Latin America see Mattelart & Schmucler, 1985: 33-37), talk shows, and documentaries on issues that are controversial or sensitive to local sentiments.

### **Economic and Cultural Domination**

Scholars like Schiller, Hamelink, Nordenstreng, and others began to show interest in the area of communication and culture following the growing tensions between the new nations (the Third World) and the Western capitalist nations (the First World), many of which happen to be colonial powers at one time or another. The issue of economic and cultural domination began to emerge in the first Non-Aligned Movement Conference in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955. It was in this conference that the Third World nations embraced the concept of individual and collective self-reliance (Sauvant, 1979: 10) and non-aligned in the ideological struggle between the Western and Eastern blocs (Tran Van Dinh & Porter, 1986: 122). The conference realised that there was a need to change the existing world economic order if the new nations were to develop and progress with the pace of modernisation in the West.

In the eyes of Third World leaders the existing economic order was oppressing to their nations. Following the Bandung conference, the issue of world economic order or what is then known as the New World Economic Order (NWEEO) was brought up repeatedly in the Non-Aligned Movement conferences several decades later. In fact, it is still a popular topic today (see Sauvant, 1979: 10-11). It later developed into the theme of the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which was taken up by the UNESCO delegates from the Third World who were also members of the Non-Aligned countries. The Third World proposition that there was a need for the world community to reorganise the present order of the world information and communication system was supported by countries from the socialist bloc. Later, these debates developed into an ideological confrontation between the capitalist nations, represented by the United States and her West European allies, and the Third World countries supported by their East European and socialist sympathizers. The result was the establishment of the MacBride Commission to study the problems (see Altschull, 1984: 207-252). The establishment of the MacBride Commission is, of course, a significant step in a series of international events which might bring some dramatic changes to the nature of the international economic and cultural order in the future. Obviously these debates have triggered considerable scholarly interest. The

subject of political and ideological as well as cultural domination became the central theme of interest to these scholars, especially when communication and information technology is a potent apparatus for cultural domination. Those with the means to control these technologies naturally have more power to dominate economically and culturally other people who do not have the means to produce or own them. In this light, it would be instructive to discuss briefly how these issues of NWEO and NWICO have emerged and have been hotly debated in the United Nations, especially the UNESCO.

### **Emergence of New Nations**

After World War II colonies were beginning to liberate themselves through political independence. Many of these colonies had previously been under colonial administrations for several centuries. The new nations gained membership in the United Nations on equal terms as their former colonial power. The leaders realized that their votes in the largest international organization were equally as important as casted by their former colonial masters. United Nations, therefore, becomes a forum to voice their dissatisfactions pertaining to the world order.

Most of these new nations have embarked on grandiose national development plans with the objectives of bringing modernisation to their societies. However, many found that their fervor to free themselves from foreign domination had instead translated into numerous frustrations. They realised that they had failed to liberate their people for now, there exist a new form of colonialism (neo-colonialism), that is, economic and cultural domination.

In order to modernise their people and the countries, the leaders of the new nations have to provide good education to the younger generation. They also have to raise the standard of living by increasing the production of the countries' natural resources and subsequently, through the development of manufacturing industries. Nonetheless, they realized that they were unable to pursue this dream without seeking help from the advanced, especially the capitalist, nations. To implement their national development plans, they must have manpower and expertise to conduct feasibility studies, as well as plan the projects and budget the expenditures. Not many new emerging nations could handle these tasks themselves. They had to seek help from the advanced nations.

To implement development projects, the leaders of the new nations had to ask for loans to finance them and hire expertise to direct the projects. Where did these necessary resources come from? Most of these technical and financial help came from the advanced industrialised countries. With the coming of these aides, these leaders were bound by the various terms of the agreement which naturally favoured the lending nations. Most binding of all loan provisions was that most of the managerial and professional personnel for the project must come from the countries that gave out the loans. All heavy and high technology equipments for the project must be purchased from the lending nations. Before the project could become productive, the new government was already experiencing the heavy burden of having to repay the loans.

In international trade, the new world countries became dumping grounds for consumer products from the industrialized nations, especially from their former colonial masters. Henceforth, new consumer societies have been created in the new nations. What is more depressing is that the centres for trading raw natural resources and agricultural produces are located in and controlled by the industrialised nations. These are the markets which determined the market prices of these commodities under the guise of the free market

mechanism. At these trading centres commodities are bought and stockpiled by the First World nations in an effort to buffer any future increase of prices of the commodities and also to be used in times of world economic or political crises. The raw materials which were purchased at very low prices at the international marketplace, were used to manufacture consumer products by the industrialised countries. These manufactured products were later sold at exorbitant prices in the producing countries. In many ways, the producing new nations lose at both ends of the trading process: selling raw materials at low prices and buying manufactured consumer products at high prices.

Closely related to this drive towards national development in the newly independent countries is the emphasis on the role of communication and mass communication as a means of achieving national development and social progress. Communication systems became the lifeline to modernising a developing society. Printed and broadcast media are supposed to be the technology for development and social change. In fact, many of the broadcast media systems in most Third World nations come under direct control of the governments. The new nations are subsequently trapped again in the web of international communication and mass communication system, as they had been subjected to in the international economic sphere mentioned above.

International communication and mass communication system is the legacy of the past colonial eras. Through this international communication and mass communication network, two major kinds of domination over the new nations emerged. Firstly, with regards to the international flow of news and secondly in relation to the unidirectional flow of popular culture materials from the industrialized nations of the West to the newly independent nations. These two aspects of international communication and mass communication are intimately linked to the economic system of the world.

Presently, there are four giant international news agencies which dominate the international flow of news—Reuters, United Press International (UPI), Associated Press (AP), and Agence France Presse (AFP) from three countries, i.e., Great Britain, United States, and France. The control is bidirectional, that is, these news agencies control the flow of international news from the developed nations to the new nations and vice versa (see Rosenblum, 1977). Similarly, the manufacturing and exporting of popular culture fares from the First World to the Third World are very lucrative businesses. Although the programs are made for local markets, especially in the US and Great Britain, they are also found to be in great demand by media operators of the new nations (Tracey, 1985).

The reason for the dependence of the media operators in the new nations on the media products from the First World is mainly economics. First and foremost, it is very expensive for news media in the new nations to maintain news bureaus in foreign countries to feed the international news to the home news media. Many of the nations have no national news agencies of their own. Even those who have cannot afford to maintain news bureaus in foreign countries. Therefore, the cheapest and most practical way is to depend on the supply of international news from the four giant news agencies.

In broadcasting, television stations in the new nations have to fill their time slots with programmes supplied by the international television programme distributing agencies. It is cheaper to rent the Western programmes than to produce local television shows. Furthermore, if these stations wish to produce their own programmes, then they have to be contented with lower quality production due to the lack of operating budget, expertise, and sophisticated equipments (Boyd, 1984).



What is frustrating the leaders of the newly independent countries is that although their countries are politically independent, they are still economically and culturally dependent on the First World countries. The technology, the international news services, and the popular culture fares they received from the First World are highly culturally biased towards Western culture. Tan, Tan, & Tan (1987) study of the cultural impact of American television programmes on high school children in the Philippines, for example, showed that there is evidence to believe that television programmes have significant effect on cultural values of the children who frequently viewed American television programmes.

The frustrations experienced by the leaders from the new nations was translated into their united stand and vocal criticisms against the world economic system. The frustrations were also reflected in their enthusiasm to change the existing economic and communication order of the world. The Non-Aligned Movement Conferences became the forum to foster a collective efforts to highlight their grievances, and the United Nations, through the UNESCO, became the battle ground for their war against Western domination. The result of almost three decades of struggle is the MacBride Commission Report which was tabled at and accepted by the 1980 UNESCO General Assembly in Paris.

### **The MacBride Commission**

The establishment of the MacBride Commission is viewed as a manifestation of the frustrations among the new nations to grapple with the perplexing questions of national development and modernisation, and cultural and economic domination by the First World. The commission began its work in December 1977, following the UNESCO's 1976 Nairobi General Conference which instructed its Director General to undertake a review of the problems of communication in contemporary society. The commission was given a very general and wide mandate "to study the totality of communication problems in modern societies" (*Many voices, one world*, 1980: xvii). It was a monumental task to be undertaken by the sixteen member commission headed by Sean MacBride considering the wide-ranging national and international communication problems facing the world today. In spite of all the difficulties the commission was able to prepare the report within two years.

Naturally the commission's 82 recommendations contained in the report, touching on the various aspects of world communication problems, fall short of a concrete plan to change the present communication system. For example, there is no definite recommendation for an immediate or a long term programme to solve the problems of one-way flow of communication which relates to the question of cultural domination, economic dependence, and the control of information. Many of the commissions recommendations were directed toward individual nations to improve their communication systems. It lacks a recommendation directed at the world body, either the UNESCO or the United Nations, to take up a concrete plan so that the economic and communication imbalances be changed or rectified at international level.

The world is uncertain on how far the developed nations are willing to change the existing order for a better one. The problem was aggravated by the threat posed by the First World countries, especially the United States and her allies which withdrawn their membership in the international organization (UNESCO) in 1985 (Starck & Yu, 1990: 91). Although the MacBride Commission report was accepted by the UNESCO General Assembly, the fear of economic and cultural domination in the future is as real as it was before. Since the then Director General of UNESCO, Amadou-Mahtar M'Bow, regarded the MacBride

Commission report as "a first stage in the endeavour to be made by the international community as a whole to consider in practical terms the challenges we have to face and the ways in which we might act in concert to meet them....," one wonders when the second and subsequent stages would be undertaken to realize the NWICO.

## Conclusion

To conclude, let me address the question whether the emerging interest in communication and culture represents a worthwhile avenue for scholarly inquiries. In light of my discussion above, it is the responsibility of communication researchers and scholars to study the issues raised in the debates that have been going on for almost four decades. These studies, hopefully, would be able to determine the extent of the seriousness of the economic and cultural dominations by the Western nations as purported by the Third world countries. In addition, it provides a vast area of research possibilities for scholarly endeavour and academic excellence.

Cultural domination can occur in many ways and in many forms. In most cases the subtlety of cultural domination affects the subconscious mind of the dominated. Mass communication is perhaps the most overwhelming vehicle for the dominant cultures of the developed world to exert their powers on the weaker cultures of the developing nations. This can be exerted through Multi National Corporations, adoption of modern technologies, international news agencies, news magazines, television, films, record distributing agencies and other popular culture fare distributing agents. It is also possible that the elites and the ruling class of the new nations are the perpetrators of the Western cultural domination in order to preserve their own hegemony and, therefore, extending their dominant ideology to the general public. After all, most of these elites were educated in the Western nations or received the Western education in schools and colleges established by the former colonial administrations. These are some of the research avenues of culture and communication worth pursuing by scholars interested in intercultural communication.

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